

At a Crossroads

THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Following the devastation of the Second World War, European nations made a commitment toward economic and political integration and cooperation in the hopes that this convergence would bring stability to the Continent. Today's European Union with its 28 member states appeared to be the realization of a vision that was established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957 when the six

RISE OF POPULIST MOVEMENTS COULD THREATEN THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

ILLUSTRATION BY LINCOLN AGNEW

founding members—Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, and the Netherlands—created the European Economic Community (EEC) that was to bring an “ever-closer union” of the peoples of Europe.

With the financial crisis of 2008, however, the term “crisis” became synonymous with Europe and challenged its ability to manage issues effectively and equitably among member states. The political winds also

began to shift as populist and nationalist parties became more prominent on the political stage across Europe. The Brexit vote of 2016 was the first manifestation of the changing tide as it opened the door for the United Kingdom's exit from the Union. The election of President Trump in the United States deepened concerns over the post-war order and security.

These developments, among others, have called into question the future of the European Union. Can the European Union successfully manage the persistent debt crisis and address populist concerns? Or will integration break down under the weight of the economic, political, and security challenges?

Colloquy sat down with former and current graduate student affiliates of the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies at Harvard to gain perspective on the challenges facing the European Union and the opportunities to address and solve them.



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The UK's Brexit vote seems to be a symptom of a larger issue within the European Union. What are the pressures leading some countries to consider leaving the EU?

Colleen Driscoll: One of the major pressures is, of course, immigration, from inside and outside the EU. The Brexit vote, for example, raised issues of border control, with Leave voters wanting to deny entry to the UK for people that they don't see as benefiting their economy or culture. They are driven by economic concerns, by a backlash against the de-industrialization of Western economies more broadly, and by xenophobia, fear of terrorism, and fear of Islamization of the West, as we see in other countries in Europe. So immigration is a key issue, as well as the idea that leaving Europe gives a country complete control over their national identity and over who may enter national territory.

Danilo Mandić: I agree with that. The simplest answer is that when times are bad, voice and loyalty become more difficult, and exit becomes more appealing.

Jonathan Mijs: Voice is something that many member states never believed they had. The EU hasn't really built that voice or strengthened their democratic

legitimacy. Many populations across Europe feel they are facing foreign forces who are making decisions that impact their lives. But also they feel impacted by the economic forces of globalization brought in by the European Union, and by the foreign bodies, foreign tongues, and foreign looks brought in by immigrants. For people who themselves are facing hardship, who are seeing their prospects and their ambitions unrealized, that is a threat, and they are calling for, if not national autonomy, then for bringing back a sense of control over their lives—even if that is an illusion.

So the movement of refugees, for example, as well as legal immigration, would feed into their fears and their desire for change?

Mandić: Sure. But I don't think there's any law of nature that says it has been perceived that way.

“This divide is increasing in Europe as it is across the world, leading to polarization—economic polarization as well as polarization of their sentiments—which they translate into politics.” — JONATHAN MIJS, PHD '17

“The EU is stuck between two goals: increasing the number of member states and developing a deeper and more meaningful integration.”

—COLLEEN DRISCOLL, PHD STUDENT IN GOVERNMENT



Aggressive propaganda campaigns have arisen across Europe, especially in Eastern Europe. The Visegrád countries, led by Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, have been absolutely disgraceful. Brexit data shows that migration was by far the most important concern. In a word cloud representing Leave voters, the most prominent word was immigration, a simplistic reference to fear of an Arab or Muslim terrorist threat. The Remain camp did very little to address this in a compelling way, and in many ways it played into fears and xenophobia. This anti-migrant sentiment is very robust. But why not ask the question: Could migration be an opportunity? Nobody asks that. Nobody dares ask that.

From an inequality perspective, are those in the center more affected by inequality, which leads to the rise in their feelings about immigration?

Mijs: For one group of people, opening borders has provided easier travel and cheaper phone plans. They applaud the market forces that have helped them, and they would like to see these benefits increase. Many are worried about how, with Brexit, the mobility they now take for granted may reduce in the coming years. These are people who generally have good jobs, who have benefited from the forces of globalization and the opening up of the markets.

And then there's a group of people who, in a very real sense, haven't benefited or perceive that they haven't. They have seen their wages drop because of

increased competition. They have not, or feel they have not, benefited from the markets opening up. They do not appreciate increased mobility because that hasn't and will never be on their mind. In fact, they feel threatened and are worried by the fact that the communities they live in are changing in nature away from what they're comfortable with. This divide is increasing in Europe as it is across the world, leading to polarization—economic polarization as well as polarization of their sentiments—which they translate into politics.

In the United States, many voted for Donald Trump because of lowering wages and job insecurity. Are we seeing something similar going on in Europe?

Driscoll: Yes, definitely. I believe that this relates back to de-industrialization and to the lack of stable, steady jobs that people kept throughout their lives. It's no longer the case that a high school diploma, for example, ensures a lifetime job in the local factory. Job prospects are more precarious, and workers now compete for jobs with individuals from other EU countries or with immigrants from outside the EU—or they might perceive that scenario as a threat. They feel as though their livelihood is being taken away from them by forces they can't control.

Mijs: These are legitimate fears. Careers are much less stable. Expectations are bleaker, leading many to oppose the European project's opening up of markets in a rational and well-informed way.

Mandić: That's extremely important. I'm always struck by the attitudes around

globalization and the opening up of borders, which allows for the movement of stuff and for the movement of people. In principle, you would expect tremendous advantages and some disadvantages. But the media reports on the disadvantages of moving people around, whereas the movement of stuff is considered wonderful. Goods should move across borders. But no one, based on the same principles of economics, is willing to admit that the movement of people could be considered economically advantageous. You only hear about the negative aspects of moving people around.

Driscoll: Yeah, definitely. In France, for example, the right wants to portray France as a sovereign nation that will care for its citizens. The right's natural focus on sovereignty and economic protectionism in France is different from right-wing parties in other countries.

Mijs: It probably is a special case in France, although you see a similar coming together of ideas in Holland, where you have Wilders advocating to rid the country of foreigners and increase support for the elderly and for the poor. Wilders began his political career as an economic liberal in what is now the centrist government party, and he left that party to form his own. He adapted his political positions into an effective form of protectionism, a belief he shares with the Socialist Party in the Netherlands. Even though the parties are at opposite ends of the political spectrum, they agree on their positions more than one would expect.